GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR IMPROVING NORTH CAROLINA'S LOWEST-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

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1 Address instabilities that constitute barriers to student achievement

2 Build individual-level competencies for effective instruction

3 Build individual-level competencies for effective leadership

4 Incorporate school-level systems and processes to sustain improvements

5 Adopt turnaround strategies that minimize unnecessary disruptions

Nearly twenty-five years ago, five counties sued the state of North Carolina claiming that their students were denied the constitutional right to a sound basic education. For a little over a decade, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) supported these schools with varying levels of intensity. In 2010, *Race to the Top* funds allowed NCDPI to expand the reach of those supports, but when the funds expired in 2014, NCDPI was left without sufficient resources to continue serving all the schools in need.

Over the last three years, a partnership grant from the US Department of Education funded an evaluation of NCDPI's supports to the 75 lowest-performing schools. This brief draws on findings from that study, informed by district and principal interviews, teacher focus groups, surveys, and administrative data analysis.[2]

While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to school improvement, the principles in this brief can be used as guideposts as North Carolina pivots to support the needs of schools and students under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

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PRINCIPLE ①

ADDRESS INSTABILITIES THAT CONSTITUTE BARRIERS TO STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

"These schools […] don't have any stability. Everything in our life is constantly changing."
– Middle School Principal

PRINCIPAL TURNOVER
(ANNUAL)
24%

TEACHER TURNOVER
(ANNUAL)
29%

STUDENT TRANSFERS
(ANNUAL)
17%

CHRONIC STUDENT ABSENTEEISM
8%

Analysis of North Carolina performance data reveals sources of instability that plague the lowest-performing schools. But turnaround efforts often focus on raising test scores without directly addressing these instabilities. Left unaddressed, these instabilities become barriers to school improvement.

Specifically, the turnover of teachers, principals, and peers destabilizes the learning environment.[3]

When principals and teachers leave, experience and skills go with them. Throughout the year, novice and alternative-entry teachers and long-term substitutes fill vacancies, but lack experience, and, frequently, the competencies needed to help students at low-performing schools.

And it's not just the staff that is in flux. Family situations cause students to move within and between districts. Students miss class time due to absences, late arrivals, early dismissals, and disciplinary infractions. These factors converge to reduce instructional time and disrupt day-to-day operations.

In another state, teacher turnover was found to suppress positive effects of efforts to improve the lowest-performing schools. Addressing barriers can directly improve school performance and clear the way for state supports to gain traction. Turnaround efforts need to **adopt evidence-based policies and practices** to help:

- *Attract and retain effective school leaders and teachers*

- *Decrease student transfers, absences, and tardies*

- *Implement school-wide procedures and systems so that students can access and complete assignments from missed class time*

"*I think overall we lack continuity and consistency. That's with leadership, teachers, strategies, support, everything. I have been here five years and had five principals.*"
– Middle School Teacher

"*I think the high teacher turnover impacts […] the culture of the school. If you have frequent turnover, then the community begins to think that teachers don't care, they're just here for a minute then they're gone.*"
– Middle School Principal

"*I had kids enroll this week and we have three weeks to go.*"
– High School Principal

"*Any of the literature that you read that talks about trying to improve student proficiency for the population we serve, it talks about the need for stability.*"
– Middle School Teacher

PRINCIPLE ②

BUILD INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL COMPETENCIES FOR EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION

Low-performing schools have high teacher turnover and therefore high rates of novice and alternative-entry teachers.[4] Developing individual-level competencies builds capacity for effective instruction, and provides resources and strategies that teachers say are critical, especially during their early years on the job.

NCDPI conducted over 3,700 instructional coaching visits at 71 schools between January 2016 and the spring of 2018, averaging about three visits per month at each school over the 18-month period. Survey results indicated that teachers who received coaching through June 2017 found it to be intensive and tailored.

Educators emphasized the importance of **adopting a curriculum aligned with state standards** and described **characteristics of effective instructional coaching.** Overall, they valued coaching sessions that:

- *Unpack state standards*

- *Help teachers use data to drive instruction*

- *Emphasize high impact testing strategies, for example to:*
  - *Incorporate vocabulary across the curriculum to improve comprehension, and*
  - *Ensure class time spent on standards reflects the frequency with which they appear on assessments*

- *Include modeling, observation, and non-evaluative feedback*

- *Combine work in professional learning communities (PLCs) with supports for individual teachers*

"You can't ask a novice teacher to unpack standards when they have no idea what a standard even is."
– Middle School Teacher

NOVICE TEACHERS
32%

ALTERNATIVE-ENTRY TEACHERS
24%

"It's nice to have feedback from a different lens, a person who's not in the building all day every day."
– Middle School Teacher

INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING
3700+ Visits to 71 Schools
~3 Visits/Month Per School

January 2016 – June 2018

"*Coaching in high probability strategies, being able to develop quality lessons, being able to differentiate the instruction. Those are the things that are going to help most.*"
– District Official

"*If you did little snapshots of the things that they've already modeled for us, you would see those being used in various classrooms.*"
– Elementary School Teacher

"*The only way for a teacher to really experience growth is to have someone who is there to work, model and provide immediate feedback on a consistent basis.*"
– Elementary School Principal

PRINCIPLE ③

BUILD INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL COMPETENCIES FOR EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

> "Just having a little consistency helps. This is one of those schools that they roll over principals and because of that, you roll over staff."
> *– Elementary School Principal*

NOVICE PRINCIPALS
51%

> "As the instructional leader of the school, it's very difficult to […] be confident that I'm providing the quality of feedback that each of my teachers need…"
> *– Elementary School Principal*

SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION COACHING
2200+ Visits to 71 Schools
~2 Visits/Month Per School

January 2016 – June 2018

Low-performing schools experience high principal and assistant principal turnover. They tend to have less experienced school leaders at the helm.[5]

Educators stressed that continuity in leadership is critical to sustaining school improvement efforts, and emphasized the principal's role in promoting consistency and accountability. Evidence from another state shows that effective principals were responsible for more than 10 percent of the improvement in successful school turnarounds.

NCDPI conducted over 2,200 school transformation coaching visits at 71 schools between January 2016 and the spring of 2018, averaging about two visits per month at each school over the 18-month period. These visits often included elements of building individual-level competencies for effective instruction and leadership (Principles 2 and 3) and incorporating school-level systems and processes to sustain improvements (Principle 4). Principals who received tailored and intensive school transformation coaching from NCDPI reported that those supports helped build school capacity for improvement.

The most **effective coaching strategies for school leadership** focused on a limited number of agreed upon goals that helped school leaders:

- *Establish a culture of accountability among educators and students*

- *Interpret data to tailor and prioritize areas for improvement*

- *Maintain focus on instructional leadership*

- *Distribute leadership to assistant principals and teacher leaders*

> "…when you get into the throes of what's going on, sometimes the principal doesn't have that time to mentor […] how do you make that happen when you're always […] putting out fires?"
> *– Middle School Principal*

> "I'm a second-year principal. [The school transformation coach] taught me how to talk to the teachers and how to build their leadership capacity."
> *– Elementary School Principal*

> "If we maintain the strong leadership that keeps everyone accountable, they can [sustain improvements]."
> *– Elementary School Principal*

PRINCIPLE ④

INCORPORATE SCHOOL-LEVEL SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES TO SUSTAIN IMPROVEMENTS

Developing individual competencies at the teacher and principal levels is imperative to improving student achievement in the short-run. However, supports invested at the individual-level alone are more vulnerable to systemic barriers, such as high educator turnover, than those that also target school-level systems and processes. Investing in this comprehensive approach to school transformation is critical to sustaining improvement efforts in low-performing schools.

School level systems and processes perceived to help sustain improvement efforts:

- *Integrate the use of data to collaboratively and objectively:*
  - *Identify and address systemic barriers*
  - *Drive instruction*
  - *Set priorities*
  - *Assess progress*
- *Establish school improvement as a process supported by NCStar*
- *Ensure consistency in school-wide instructional and administrative practices*
- *Select curriculum and align within and across content areas and grade levels, particularly in tested subjects*

"I've never seen so much data in my life. The data makes me more accountable for my children."
– Elementary School Teacher

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLANS (SIP)

100% submitted SIP using NCStar

91% received feedback on SIP

87% reported feedback as specific and useful

2018 Survey Data

"I think when you have to bring in new teachers, then it's like starting over because they don't know what we've done in the past to get to where we are."
– Elementary School Principal

"A lot of times, people look to a person and say fix it. There's really a whole process to how you can do this and [have] it be systematic."
– District Official

"NCStar makes you much more accountable to tracking your progress towards your goals and providing the evidence…"
– Elementary School Teacher

"…keeping in mind that we may lose staff, we've put systems in place so that when they leave and we get new people in, they will automatically get exactly what my teachers have already received."
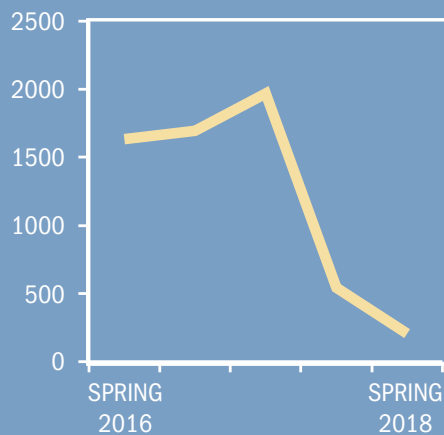– Elementary School Principal

PRINCIPLE ⑤

ADOPT TURNAROUND STRATEGIES THAT MINIMIZE UNNECESSARY DISRUPTIONS

> "If a transformational team is going to be here, they need to be more consistent and they need to be building […] relationships."
>
> *– Middle School Principal*

NCDPI COACHING VISITS DECLINED AFTER STATE-LEVEL BUDGET CUTS IN 2017

Low-performing schools face many challenges—principal turnover is prevalent, teacher turnover is high, and many students cope with challenges stemming from intergenerational poverty. Furthermore, educators report that the "low-performing" designation makes it difficult to recruit and retain teachers, engage parents, and establish credibility within the community. Under these circumstances, teachers and principals note that disruptions from unexpected or inconsistent state supports exacerbate the instability that interferes with student learning.

Both teachers and principals observed that building trust and relationships takes time and is critical to effective coaching. To earn that trust, coaches need to be consistently present and demonstrate a deep understanding of the school's culture and context. Uncertainty about the type, timing, and amount of services schools will receive from the state diminishes receptivity to outside supports and undermines improvement efforts.

Educators identified additional **ways to improve implementation,** suggesting that the state:

- *Clearly communicate with schools and districts about roles, rationale, and expected impact of changes in support models*

- *Introduce supports during the August planning period*

- *Scale services for frequent and consistent delivery throughout the school year to ensure they're perceived as supports rather than interruptions*

- *Align coaching goals with School Improvement Plans to focus coaching activities and avoid conflicting priorities*

> "*If you truly want to turn around a school, you got to get in there and know the school. Know the culture. You can't know the culture showing up six or eight times a year.*"
>
> *– District Official*

> "*We're in a state of urgency and [we were] hanging there for almost a whole semester. We didn't have any support.*"
>
> *– Elementary School Principal*

> "*I think it's a great support if it was fully funded and the coaches had a realistic caseload.*"
>
> *– Middle School Principal*

THE ROAD AHEAD

The principles in this brief are grounded in the experiences of North Carolina's 75 lowest-performing schools, from January 2016 through spring 2018.

The model for NCDPI school improvement supports will notably shift in the present school year. Beginning in the 2018-19 school year, North Carolina must meet ESSA requirements to designate Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) schools—the lowest-performing five percent of Title 1 schools and high schools with four-year cohort graduation rates below 66.7 percent.

Administrative data show the instability and systemic barriers that plague North Carolina's low-performing schools are even more pronounced in CSI schools.[6]

However, CSI schools are more urban than the evaluation cohort of 75 schools and include a substantial number of alternative schools. Given these differences, North Carolina could benefit from looking at support models in states already serving schools that more closely resemble CSI schools.

Several studies show that hiring and retaining effective, experienced teachers and principals, often by offering financial incentives to work in low-performing urban schools, contribute to the positive effects of school reforms. These findings validate what principals and teachers said over and over again in interviews and focus groups—that lower pay and heavier workloads in North Carolina's lowest-performing schools lead to turnover, which undermines improvement efforts.

More than 20 years have passed since the *Leandro* ruling, but North Carolina's low-performing schools still struggle to meet the needs of their students. Under ESSA, North Carolina can build on the five principles described in this brief to develop better models to support those schools. By taking on complementary roles, the state, districts, and schools can meet North Carolina's constitutional obligation to provide a sound and basic education to all students across the state.

CSI SCHOOLS FACE PRONOUNCED BARRIERS

75 SCHOOL EVALUATION COHORT	ESSA CSI SCHOOLS
PRINCIPAL TURNOVER (ANNUAL)	
24%	39%
TEACHER TURNOVER (ANNUAL)	
29%	36%
STUDENT TRANSFERS (ANNUAL)	
17%	45%
CHRONIC STUDENT ABSENTEEISM	
8%	33%

FOOTNOTES

2   **Sources:**

- Quotes are from site visits conducted in spring 2018, which included 20 district interviews, 42 principal interviews, and focus groups with 368 teachers.

- School leader surveys were administered to the evaluation cohort of 75 schools in spring 2017 (response rate of 75%) and spring 2018 (response rate of 57%).

- Statistics are school-level means at baseline. Baseline is the school year prior to implementation of the intervention.

- References for studies mentioned in the text are available on request.

3   **Principle 1:** Data reported at baseline (2014-15 school year), which is the year schools were identified as low-performing.

- Principal turnover represents the percent of schools that had a principal turnover, among principals who spent at least three pay periods as principal in that school and year.

- Student transfers are nonstructural transfers into a school, defined as the percent of the student body who transferred into the school outside of the typical feeder pattern.

- Chronic absenteeism is defined according to the North Carolina Board of Education definition, as missing at least 10 percent of enrolled days in a school and being enrolled for at least 10 school days.

4   **Principle 2:** Novice teachers are those with three or fewer years of teaching experience. Alternative-entry teachers are those who received their teaching license through a nontraditional entry portal other than Teach for America.

5   **Principle 3:** Novice principals are defined as those with three or fewer years of principal experience.

6   **The Road Ahead:** Data reported are school-level means for the evaluation cohort of 75 schools at baseline (2014-15 school year) and the new cohort of CSI schools at their baseline (2017-18 school year). Chronic absenteeism is higher across all schools in 2018 because absence data in that year was collected and calculated differently by NCDPI. When data were calculated the same way as in 2015, CSI schools had a chronic absenteeism rate of 26 percent.

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